DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 147 866 CS 203 824

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TITLE Junior Highs and Middle Schools Are Where It's At.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 5p.; A publication of the Inkwell, Ltd.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; Composition (Literary); *English Instruction; *Individualized Instruction; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Junior High Schools; *Learning Activities; Middle Schools; Student Interests; *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

The special vitality and enthusiasms of junior high and middle school students demand a unique kind of English program. This paper offers teaching ideas that are applicable at a wide range of educational levels but that are especially relevant for junior high and middle school students. The ideas are divided into two categories: ideas for developing a classroom atmosphere that meets a wide range of needs and interests and allows opportunities for individual growth and ideas for an interdisciplinary approach to English teaching that can lead to creative and expository writing, panels and discussions, media projects, demonstrations, and research papers. (GW)

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THE INKWELL EXTRA

Junior Highs and Middle Schools Are Where It's At

Several years ago we attended a meeting where junior and senior high school English teachers were engaged in a discussion of the pleasures and pains of teaching at their respective levels. In the midst of the discussion, one JHS teacher blurted out, "Don't you see? Junior highs are where it's at!" "Yeah," grumbled one of the high school teachers, "but what is 'IT'?"

We think the "IT"--the thing that makes teaching in a junior high or middle school so exciting and important--centers on the JHS/MS students themselves. Midway between childhood and adulthood, engaged in a period of rapid physical, emotional, and psychological growth, the JHS/MS kids bring natural enthusiasm, excitement, and creativity to their work. They lack adult sophistication, but they are (delightfully) less inhibited than adults and senior high students; further, they are capable of exceptional work, and their range of interests is exhaustive (and frequently exhausting).

The combined vitality and potential of these students demands a unique kind of English program and teachers who are resourceful, creative, and responsive. The ideas which follow are, we think, applicable at a wide range of educational levels, but they are especially important for students in the eleven to fourteen age bracket. Junior highs and middle schools are where IT's at.

THE CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE

Given the diversity of the JHS/MS students, the concept of the "student-centered" program is especially important. The teacher must respond to a wide range of needs and interests to develop a classroom atmosphere that allows many opportunities for individual growth. We've had good experiences with the following:

- It is important to consider students' need when establishing policy. Instead of issuing directives, try involving students in planning guidelines and programs. Make them aware of your attitudes and priorities and explain the limitations of curriculum and school rules; then ask them to consider such matters as content, discipline, rights, responsibilities, and their own priorities. The discussion should lead to a reasonable consensus, and since students have helped formulate the policies and aims, they are likely to become more actively involved in the class.

- Try to schedule free time at least twice a month (preferably once a week)

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for students to pursue special, individualized interests. You'll have to establish some guidelines, but students should be free to choose their own activities. During this time period you can talk to people about projects, learn more about their special interests, and explore related topics. We have found that when students know they have a chance for independent time, they work more efficiently and become deeply involved in class activities. During the first few weeks of this program, you may need to suggest a few topics or options so the students do not feel abandoned. Suggested activities: preparing a skit, writing stories, reading, tutoring other students, discussing current events, writing and recording a radio show, listening to music and writing new lyrics, talking about books, preparing a puppet show, developing a program on a current issue or problem, presenting programs to other classes.

•No one ever outgrows the need for "show and tell." Set aside a few minutes each week for students to share their interests with the rest of the class. Encourage them to bring in unusual objects, discuss interesting topics, and demonstrate their talents. This sharing provides an excellent opportunity to learn about other people, and you might discover a poet, songwriter, or ventriloquist in your class. Join in show and tell yourself; students will be interested in your active participation, and you may learn from the experience.

•Provide flexibility in the day-to-day routine. JHS/MS students do better on their assignments if they have ample time for work. Provide some flexibility in assignments and due dates. We have found that students respond positively to this kind of freedom, especially if they have been consulted in setting up the schedule. Build assignments that are rich in alternatives, and encourage the students to add more.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ENGLISH FOR THE JUNIOR HIGH YEARS

English is an umbrella subject, and given the interest range of JSH/MS students, an interdisciplinary approach works well. In "English" students can research, interpret, and share information and ideas on history, social studies, art, music, literature, popular culture, mass media, and even science and math. The interdisciplinary approach can lead to creative and expository writing, panels and discussions, media projects, demonstrations, and even a range of "research" papers.

•Explore the use of drama by combining reading, writing, and performing. Most anthologies contain one or several plays, and magazines and library collections offer other sources. Have students read plays (either individually or in small or large groups); then have them write a play for class production. Extend the assignment to allow students to present a dramatic reading or improvisation or to film an entire play.

•Plan a media festival. Since junior high students are naturally media oriented, let them develop thinking and language skills through exploring visual media. Students can read TV scripts, view and evaluate television programs, compare the effectiveness and limitations of movies, slides, and filmstrips, or write, rehearse, and produce an original film. Many school libraries have slide collections, and inexpensive films are available through area booking agencies.

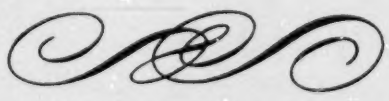
•JHS/MS students are increasingly interested in the commercial and persuasive uses of language in society. Explore propaganda techniques and persuasive writing by conducting an ad unit. Students can explore slogans, survey buying habits, and determine advertising strategies, and you'll find that students are surprisingly conscious of the way manipulative processes are employed by many advertisers. Other possibilities include presenting an original television commercial, writing a jingle, or auctioning off fictional products. For fun, give your students product names like "Snivlets" or "Ribel-O" and have them create the product and sell it.

•Develop an interdisciplinary poetry unit using films, recorded poems, nonsense verse, rock lyrics, and thematic groupings. Find a poem and a play on a common topic and have students compare forms and effectiveness. Read a poem to the class and let the students prepare a non-verbal or media response to it.

•Help your students improve their oral skills by sharing folk tales and legends, by recording their own short stories, or by presenting interpretive dramatic readings. People who are too shy to make a speech can impersonate a famous individual and read a collection of quotes or significant writings (Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Lee's surrender speech at Appomattox, Nixon's Checkers speech). Students can also present humorous skits based on storybook characters, television personalities, or fairy tales. Have students conduct interviews, debate important local issues, or teach the class about a project they have researched. Have one person pantomime a scene or event while another person describes the story. Explore forms of sign language and allow students to combine hand signals and oral descriptions to tell an original tale.

•Have your students form a concerned citizens group. Select a problem that interests all of the students (hunger, the oil crisis, back-to-basics, pollution control, busing), investigate key aspects of the topic, and then prepare a list of possible solutions. This kind of activity can involve public opinion surveys, interviews, letter writing, reading, critical thinking, organizing facts and information, preparing demonstration materials, and report writing. Students will also have to consider value systems and the interrelationship of world and local problems.

•The term paper or research paper is an often-criticized project, but treated in a low key manner, doing "research" is a legitimate and potentially exciting activity for JHS/MS students. Try having students do an "era study." Most junior high students will be interested in researching the American West, the Roaring Twenties, or the Space Age. Provide them with a list of possible topics and let them do some background reading before they make a final selection; include famous personalities, scientific inventions, social trends, comparative literature, and historic events among the options. Expand the students' understanding by showing films, exhibiting models, or playing records. Invite local historians and guest lecturers to make presentations to the class, and whenever appropriate, plan a field trip to an area museum. Ask your students to share their insights with the rest of the class by creating a non-verbal response to accompany the term paper, and set aside time for discussion of the topics.



ENRICHING THE JUNIOR HIGH CLASSROOM

• Provide a reading corner where students can read, discuss, and respond creatively to books that are not a required part of the curriculum. Students can help design the floor plan, establish necessary rules and guidelines, and decorate the walls with posters and book reviews. Teachers can encourage use of the corner by scheduling regular free reading periods, locating and recommending materials, and offering independent reading as an alternative to other work. Although the reading area should be part of the total classroom setting, it might be desirable to define its boundaries: paper dividers, egg carton partitions, and decorated refrigerator boxes give some isolation and soundproofing.

• Develop a classroom library that includes books, magazines, newspapers, tape recordings, pamphlets, subject files, and records. Government agencies, historical societies, and private companies are generous sources of free literature, and it is often possible to include periodical subscriptions when you place yearly book orders. You can develop library resource files by asking students to bring in copies of favorite poems, photographs, and articles, and you might schedule a monthly "clipping" session during which students can search magazines and newspapers for information on selected topics. Other possibilities include collecting and binding class writings, having students publish their own magazines and newspapers, or removing the binding from discarded textbooks to create literature packets or thematic units. Finally, the school librarian can recommend popular titles, and your students can preview new acquisitions.

• Don't overlook the potential of word games. Set up a game shelf and stock it with Password, vocabulary bingo sheets, crossword books, Concentration, Scribbage, Sentence Scrabble, and word search puzzles. Games are available commercially, but they can be made easily by teachers or students. With some ingenuity, maps, menus, and brochures become game boards. Since most students enjoy the challenge of creating as well as solving puzzles, they can create language games as an alternative assignment.

• Use colorful posters, mobiles, and paintings to enliven the room and stimulate student imagination. Encourage class members to create murals which can become a permanent room fixture, and consider having your students construct displays as an alternative to the written research paper. If possible, set up a showcase to display art objects, cultural artifacts, and student collections. Try to make the junior high classroom rich in resources so that students will want to respond and share. An attractive learning environment will stimulate involvement, simplify instruction, and convey your interest in your students.

• Eliminate the traditional row seating, and try grouping desks. This has several advantages: The classroom will seem larger and less crowded; the groups can be used as activity centers; students can share their learning experiences; several different projects can go on simultaneously, and the arrangement will reflect the class student-centered approach.

This INKWELL "EXTRA" was prepared by Wendy Neininger.